

FREEMAN A. HRABOWSKI, III

Leadership for a New Age

Higher Education's Role in Producing Minority Leaders

MY EXPERIENCE as an undergraduate at Hampton University filled me with a sense of excitement about learning and shaped many of my views. My professors prepared me to live and lead in a world that would not necessarily expect a lot from me. At Hampton, I was praised for being curious and even sometimes

rebellious. I learned

about the importance

of putting students first, expecting the most of them, giving them the support they need to succeed, and emphasizing leadership and service. I know that students grow from being challenged intellectually and from receiving support, both academic and personal. That philosophy governs my approach as a university president.

In 1970 when I entered graduate school at the University of Illinois, I realized for the first time just how few African Americans and other minorities could be found in graduate programs, especially in science and engineering. For the past thirty years, I have spent much of my professional career addressing this issue and supporting minority and other students. My thinking has been rooted in the idea of "The Talented Tenth," expressed a century ago by W.E.B. DuBois (1903). In his treatise, *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois wrote,

Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character?...[I]t is, ever was, and

ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up...This is the history of human progress...How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few strengthened? There can be but one answer: the best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land.

DuBois was writing, of course, about the importance of liberal education, which is something I emphasize in my convocation address each year to new freshmen. In fact, I talk about the meaning of liberal education—that the word *liberal* comes from the Latin adjective *liber*, meaning free. The word *education* comes from both the Latin verb *duco*, meaning to lead, and the prefix *e*, which means *out of*. Defined literally, then, liberal education means *the free act of leading out of*. Most often, liberal education has been associated with free people, who, unlike slaves or indentured servants, had time to cultivate the intellect. I talk about another popular interpretation of liberal education as education for its own sake—much like climbing a mountain because the mountain is there—and the freedom to think and explore ideas in any direction.

Intellectual models

While DuBois may have been the first African American to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard and one of the first to focus the nation's attention on the issue of blacks, higher education, and the value of liberal education, he was following in the footsteps of other black luminaries, a few of whom deserve special note.

Those of us in higher education chose this profession because we know that education transforms lives

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Few Americans know that well before the Civil War, selected liberal arts colleges like Harvard and Bowdoin admitted from time to time an exceptional black. Even fewer know about leaders such as Fanny Jackson Coppin, who as a teenage girl had been a servant in a Newport, Rhode Island home. She eventually attended Oberlin College, one of the nation's few colleges open to blacks in the mid-nineteenth century. After earning her bachelor's degree in 1865, she taught and later became principal at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, the city's only high school for black students and perhaps the nation's leading school of its kind at that time, where she worked for thirty-seven years.

At the Institute, she hired Edward Bouchet, my hero, a physicist, and the first African American to graduate from Yale (1874, Phi Beta Kappa), where he ranked sixth in his class of 124. In 1876, he earned his doctorate in geometrical optics and became the first black to receive a Ph.D. at an American university. Unable to find a faculty position, Bouchet joined Fanny Jackson Coppin at the Institute, where he taught physics and chemistry for twenty-six years. Both Coppin and Bouchet left the Institute in 1902 because its college-preparatory program, reflecting DuBois's philosophy, was discontinued by the school's all-white board in favor of Booker T. Washington's industrial-education approach. The Institute ultimately became a vocational and teacher-preparatory school and moved to Cheney, Pennsylvania, where it was renamed Cheney State College. Before his death in 1916, Bouchet took several positions at high schools and small black colleges, but never had the opportunity to pursue fully his passion for physics. What a waste of talent. In contrast, Booker Washington was the first African American leader invited to sit with the President at the White House.

Also of note is Patrick Healy, whose name few people know—although he was the first African-American president of a predominantly white institution. Healy led Georgetown University from 1873 to 1881. Born in Georgia in 1830, he was the son of a former Irish soldier and a domestic slave, whose marriage by a traveling preacher was considered unlawful in Georgia at the time. His parents

The program engenders an expectation of excellence

sent him first to Quaker schools in New York and Vermont and then to Holy Cross College in Massachusetts, where he earned his undergraduate degree in 1850. He subsequently studied at the Catholic University of Louvain, in Belgium, and completed his Ph.D. in 1863. Patrick and his brother, Sherwood, who earned a doctorate from the North American College in Rome in 1860, were the first two African Americans to receive Ph.D.s, albeit in European universities. At Georgetown, Healy became prefect of studies (chief academic officer) in 1868 and president in 1873. He is recognized for reforming the curriculum, fundraising for a new multi-use building that bears his name today, strengthening the school's medical and law schools, and creating the alumni association. Of course, his students did not know he was black.

These luminaries share a powerful bond: their strong liberal education that prepared them to become leaders. But it would be almost a century before blacks were legally admissible at all-white colleges and universities in the South, where most blacks resided. In fact, throughout much of the twentieth century, the majority of blacks with college degrees and the majority of black leaders—teachers, lawyers, doctors, and others—had graduated from historically black colleges and universities.

I frequently tell the story of my mother, who grew up in rural Wetumpka, Alabama during the 1920s and '30s. From age twelve through high school, much like Fanny Jackson Coppin, she worked as a maid in the home of a wealthy white family, and while she could not go to a predominantly white university, she did attend black colleges in Alabama, including Alabama A&M University and Tuskegee. Working as a child maid taught her two important lessons—this story inspires me every day: First, she decided she did not want to be a maid all her life, for obvious reasons; second, she learned the value of reading. The advantage of working in this home was that the woman of the house allowed her, after she finished her work, to spend time to read books in the library. At that time, few homes had any books besides the Bible, and there was no public library for her. Reading allowed my mother to think about her future and to

dream about the possibilities. Her dream was to become a teacher of literature. To her there was no more noble profession. It is a rich American story that for over forty years, from the mid-1930s to the late '70s, she was privileged to teach thousands of children. As she always said, "Education transforms lives." At the end of her life, she told me, "Teachers touch eternity through their students."

The national context

This past year, Clemson University convened a conference to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of higher education's desegregation in South Carolina. The conference theme was "Best Practices in Black Student Achievement." Like Clemson, many colleges and universities began major desegregation efforts in the 1960s by admitting black students, and today more than 80 percent of all black college students are enrolled in predominantly white institutions, and about three-quarters of all bachelor's degrees earned by blacks are

awarded by these schools (American Council on Education 2000). The issue of minority student achievement has become increasingly important because of the growing numbers of minorities in American society, including not only African Americans but also Native Americans and Latinos, the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. In terms of high school completion, college participation, and college graduation rates (ACE 2002), as well as income levels and health status, all of these groups trail significantly behind their white and Asian-American counterparts.

Colleges and universities—as well as companies, national agencies, and foundations—are regularly sending representatives to visit the University of Maryland, Baltimore County because of our success in preparing high-achieving minority students over the past decade, including in science and engineering (S&E). Our experience is especially noteworthy given the nation's growing diversity and the recent attention focused on affirmative action.



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Many of us have read Bok and Bowen's *The Shape of the River* (1998), which conveys the essence of these compelling issues, and we know about the Supreme Court's recent affirmative action rulings involving the University of Michigan.

The Supreme Court rulings are especially relevant to minority students aspiring to become leaders. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor issued a powerful statement on this point:

In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity.

But she also expressed the expectation that "twenty-five years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*). Anyone who looks carefully at the reading and mathematics skills of minority children and the requirements of the nation's No Child Left Behind Act realizes that this goal will challenge us all. Even as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, far too many black and Latino children attend segregated schools that are underfunded, underachieving, and unequal. It is a tragedy that the average mathematics and reading scores of black twelfth graders are slightly below those of white eighth graders (Therstrom and Therstrom 2003). And the situation for Latinos is equally troublesome.

To place Justice O'Connor's expectation in perspective, we should ask ourselves several questions: How do we strengthen K-12 education for all of America's minority students? How can we help the highest achieving minority students become more competitive, on such traditional academic measures as grades, standardized test scores, representation in gifted and talented classes, successfully competing for college admission, and effectively preparing for productive careers? How do we develop and implement strategies to increase the number of minorities at the highest levels of achievement in society, such as research scientists and university professors?

Only by creating and supporting a larger pool of high-achieving minority students can we ultimately increase the number of faculty of color in our colleges and universities and the number of minorities who become leading professionals, in general. We have made substantial progress over the past thirty years, but

the fact remains that most predominantly white colleges and universities have very small numbers of minority faculty. Similarly, though we see increased numbers of minorities in some areas (e.g., law), the percentages continue to be disproportionately low in most professional fields—not just science and engineering and architecture, where it's 1 percent, but also in the social sciences and humanities and in recent years among new K-12 teachers.

But the College Board's study on minority high academic achievement, *Reaching the Top* (1999), suggests that the greatest disparity in academic achievement, between underrepresented minority students and others is in mathematics and science. This persistent achievement gap, coupled with dramatic demographic trends, poses serious challenges for America's colleges and universities in recruiting and educating minority students for the national workforce, including the academy.

Implementing a vision of minority student achievement

What I would like to do now is focus on what we can do to increase the number of minorities who excel in science and engineering and become leaders. I offer the experience of my campus in this area as one example having implications for improving minority academic performance and producing minority leaders in general. As *Reaching the Top* suggests, perhaps no area in which to make progress has been more difficult than science. We can attack this problem by focusing not only on improving retention and graduation rates—the first step—but also on ensuring that minority students succeed in course work, that they gain substantive research experience, and that they go on to graduate work and to teaching and research careers. National agencies have been working in this area for decades with moderate success at the undergraduate level and relatively little success at the graduate level. While the percentage of underrepresented minorities earning bachelor's degrees in science and engineering has increased slightly in recent years (from nearly 10 percent in 1990 to 12 percent now), minorities in total still account for only about 3 percent of all engineering doctorates and 4 percent of all science doctorates (U.S. Department of Education 2000).

With approximately 12,000 students, UMBC enjoys a diverse student population

(about 17 percent Asian, 15 percent African American, 3 percent Hispanic and Native American) from more than ninety countries, with more than half of the undergraduates and 60 percent of the doctoral

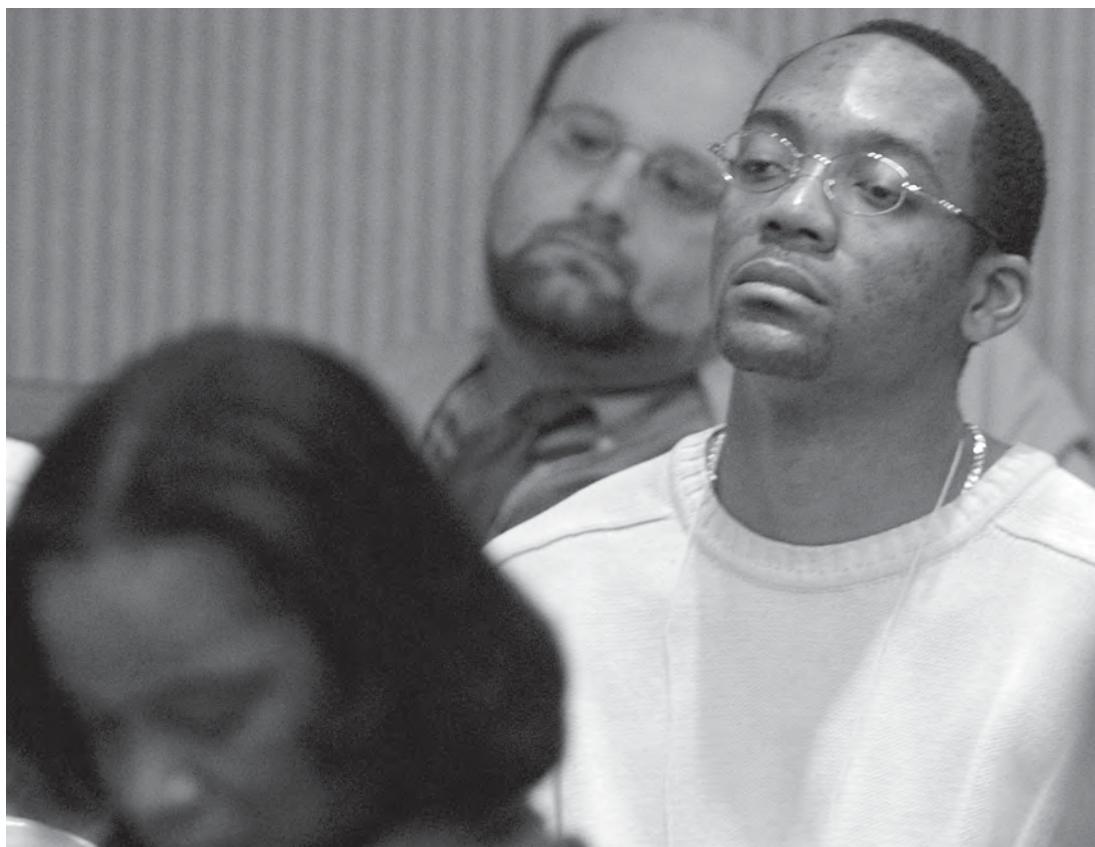
Any lessons
learned in working
with minority students
could help
students in general

students pursuing science and engineering (S&E) degrees. In the late 1980s, we found that most African Americans were not performing well academically, especially in S&E. My colleagues and I were able to secure a major donation from Baltimore philanthropists Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, who had a special interest in supporting young African Americans, particularly men. As a result of that gift, the university created the Meyerhoff Scholars Program in 1988 for high-achieving minority students in science and engineering. Now other students are also in the program. One measure of the challenge was that even I, with a background in mathematics, did not know whether we would succeed in increasing substantially the number of minority students who excelled in these areas. In my research, in fact, I had not found a predominantly white institution that had done so.

First, we in higher education unfortunately have tended to focus more on minority students' deficiencies than on their strengths, and while much of the discussion in education is about addressing the

achievement gap, we also need to ensure that at least some minority students achieve at the highest of levels. We have focused on creating a climate that attracts serious minority students, sets high expectations of them, and then takes a proactive approach in helping them to succeed. Most important, our senior faculty have taken ownership of the program and of the students' education, and the students, themselves, comprise a community of young scholars who support each other and focus on the excitement of research. Such efforts have produced profound changes in the culture of the campus.

What did we do to create a supportive environment for minority students? First, we focused on providing effective support for *all* students. We raised basic, though very important, questions about the general student body. We found that large numbers of them,



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Ninety Years in Print

*Excerpt from William Mather Lewis,
“Educational Problems: Some Observations
on Academic Tree Sitting,” AAC Bulletin,
November 1930*

The apparent “rage” for tree sitting endurance feats on campuses in 1930 is used as a metaphor to describe the students, instructors, and environment of sheer and dull doggedness.—EDITOR

The academic tree sitter possesses aimless endurance. The successful student exhibits purposeful endurance. That the tree sitting group is so large is not alone the fault of the individual but the college as well. The students are aimless in many cases because the college itself is aimless. Ask many college executives or faculty members to define the purpose of their institution or of college education in general and you will be regaled either with meaningless generalities or parrot-like repetition. And still if a college is worth attending, its purpose is capable of definition and of simple definition as well. And if the student is to be a success in college, he must have a well defined idea of what he is there for and what the college has to offer that is worthwhile.

regardless of race, were not doing well in science and were very discouraged, often leaving science and sometimes the university.

What were the academic backgrounds of our S&E students, and how were they doing academically? What were faculty and students' perceptions about coursework and available support beyond the classroom? Did students feel isolated? Did students know what to do to succeed by such things as study habits, tutorial assistance, group study, and communicating with faculty?

We held a series of focus groups with students, faculty, and staff. Based on what we

learned during these discussions, we developed strategies for giving more support to students, including, for example, strengthening teaching in first-year courses, providing more feedback to students earlier in the semester, encouraging group study, and strengthening the tutorial centers. We also looked closely at our admission standards for all students to determine which applicants could succeed at the university given the level of available support.

Finally, we developed major partnerships with national agencies and corporations and began recruiting more faculty with interest in these areas, while expanding sponsored programs and physical facilities. We decided to make this issue a high priority of our fundraising campaign and have raised millions of dollars to support these students and meet associated operational expenses.

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program
One of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program's distinguishing features is its assumption that every student competitively selected has the ability not only to graduate—given appropriate opportunities and resources—but also to excel, because the program engenders an expectation of excellence. Its components include (1) recruiting top minority students in math and science; (2) a summer bridge program; (3) comprehensive merit scholarship support; (4) active faculty involvement in recruiting, teaching, and students' research experiences; (5) strong programmatic values including high achievement, study groups, tutoring, and preparing for graduate or professional school; (6) substantive research experiences for students; (7) intensive academic advising and personal counseling; (8) active involvement of the entire campus; (9) linking students with mentors; (10) a strong sense of community among the students; (11) communication with the students' families; and (12) continuous evaluation and documentation of program outcomes (Maton, et al. 2000).

By all measures, the program is highly successful, graduating hundreds of students who go on to graduate and professional schools and who are part of a pipeline of minority and female Ph.D.s, M.D.s, and M.D./Ph.D.s. In fact, the program has become the leading producer in the country of African Americans going on to science Ph.D.s. According to recent data, UMBC ranked first in the nation in

the number of undergraduate biochemistry degrees awarded to African Americans, producing nearly one-third of the national total several years ago (American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology 2000). Our success at the undergraduate level has led to similarly successful initiatives in our doctoral programs.

Most important, our efforts have strengthened the performance of students in all disciplines. So, what are some of the most important lessons we have learned?

Taking ownership of the issue and building trust and confidence to address it are essential. One can tell how important an issue is to a campus by seeing who "the players" are. To what extent are the president, chancellor, provost, and appropriate deans, chairs, and senior faculty involved? Clearly, these leaders can play instrumental roles in setting a tone for high academic achievement among all students. To succeed, we needed not only to build trust, but also to identify allies among leading faculty and influential administrators who would support the initiatives. These allies helped colleagues to understand the issue and to realize that any lessons learned in working with minority students could help students in general; this approach diffused what potentially could have been a substantial backlash.

Allocating institutional resources to support diversity obviously is important, especially during the current period of severe budget constraints. It is during this period that we see what is most important to each of our campuses. It is important, too, for students to have exposure to faculty and administrators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. We have been vigilant in recruiting minority and women S&E tenure-track faculty. One point that has impressed minority candidates at UMBC is our success with minority students. Finally, it is important to create a climate that allows people to discuss this issue openly. We have found that in healthier campus cultures, people talk honestly about difficult issues, without pointing fingers.

Two years ago I was deeply honored to receive Yale University's Edward A. Bouchet Leadership Award in Minority Graduate Education. Bouchet's accomplishments, which came at the end of Reconstruction and the emergence of Jim Crow, should serve as an inspiration to us all. We stand on the shoulders

of giants like Edward Bouchet, Fanny Jackson Coppin, and Patrick Healy. Our challenge is to believe that tens of thousands of minority students in our institutions and in our communities have the same potential as these leaders. Too few of them are comfortable showing how smart they are. They need our support. Those of us in higher education chose this profession because we know that education transforms lives. A century ago, DuBois (1903) recognized the special mission of our institutions. He wrote,

A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will suffice. □

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